THE AESTHETICS OF JOHN RUSKIN IN RELATION TO THE AESTHETICS OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

BY

LESTER CHARLES DOLK
A.B., DePauw University, 1927
A.M., University of Illinois, 1929

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1938

URBANA, ILLINOIS
1941

THE AESTHETICS OF JOHN RUSKIN IN RELATION TO THE AESTHETICS OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

BY

LESTER CHARLES DOLK
A.B., DePauw University, 1927
A.M., University of Illinois, 1929

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1938

URBANA, ILLINOIS
1941

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/IA41549820_0054

THE AESTHETICS OF JOHN RUSKIN IN RELATION TO THE AESTHETICS OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

Since the spontaneous generation of ideas is a very rare phenomenon indeed, even the most original mind is the product not only of its own past but also of the past of the race, the more the product in proportion as it has received cultivation from education and wide reading. But ideas, being volatile by nature, having powerful affinities for one another, and being affected by the very medium which gives them expression, may in the process of transmission from one generation to another suffer such strange transformations that to the casual eye there appears to be very slight continuity. Let two old concepts leap into union, and their product may have all the appearance of complete novelty; or, let a highly individual rhetoric be applied to the expression of a familiar concept, and the resulting statement may very well seem at first glance to be original. And in a sense of the word, of course, the product of a new union of ideas or of a new expression of a familiar concept is original, even though the basic materials be hoary with antiquity. It is for this reason that minds which are felt to have enriched the store of human thought are generally considered to be original even though they are to a considerable extent derivative; although they draw materials from the past, by the strange chemistry of genius they recombine and re-express those materials in new syntheses.

Although John Ruskin is generally admitted to have been one of the great minds of his century, the extent to which he was indebted to his immediate predecessors for fundamental concepts in the field of aesthetics has never been sufficiently considered. W. G. Collingwood, in *The Art Teaching of John Ruskin,* probably the best single summary of Ruskin's views on aesthetic matters, states that Ruskin knew Barry, Fuseli, Burke, Coleridge, Plato, and Aristotle on the subject of beauty; but the total impression left by the book is that Ruskin excogitated his system of aesthetics for himself. F. W. Roe, in his excellent article on "John Ruskin and the Sense of Beauty," suggests that the major portion of Ruskin's ideas about art had a biographical origin; that is to say, they were the product of his own experience rather

than of his reading in previous writers upon the subject. In the most recent treatment of Ruskin's aesthetics, Henry Ladd's *The Victorian Morality of Art,* while some attempt is made to place the Ruskinian aesthetics against a background of tradition, there is a serious fundamental misunderstanding of just what the Ruskinian aesthetics were, and the book is further marred by an attempt to demonstrate the thesis that a confusion of ideas has produced a system of thought which is, to use the author's word, "preposterous." Of systematic investigation into the background, to discover just how much Ruskin owed to his romantic predecessors, and to determine just what he did with the derived materials, there has been very little.

To state the system as briefly as possible, Ruskin's aesthetics had their roots in a mystical outlook upon life. The crux of the entire system is morality defined as a conception of the universe as a totality every part of which is governed by and gives evidence of beneficent law and order established by divine love on the part of the Creator. Under this concept, every particle of the vast whole has appointed for its existence a specially established law, and in proportion as it obeys this law, it discharges its function healthily and happily. Understanding of this fact by man constitutes morality of understanding; ideally, moral conduct (what is usually understood by the term *morality*) ought to follow. That it does not always in practice do so, may be blamed on the Adamite curse and the weakness of the human will, which makes it possible for human understanding and desire to outrun human powers of performance. It is imperative that the artist possess this moral understanding, and it is the function of art to promote it in the beholder. As a corollary, it follows that the artist must observe nature closely and reverently in order to understand the plan and the law manifested in it, and that he must reproduce natural forms accurately and minutely in order that in art they may convey the same significance they possess in actuality. Art which lacks either of these three elements—moral understanding on the part of the artist, minute observation of nature, and faithful reproduction of natural forms—will be bad art.

In this scheme of things, beauty is conceived as an objective existence, giving rise, in the aesthetic experience, to a subjective sense of beauty entirely free from the intellect, spontaneous and

intuitive, conditioned by the moral understanding of the percipient. Certain aspects of external creation are especially suited to produce the sense of beauty; namely, the appearance of infinite complexity in things which are yet unified by subjection to a common influence, by common origin, or by sequence; the appearance of repose; the appearance of moderation; the appearance of symmetry; the appearance of purity; and the appearance in things of being perfectly fitted to perform the functions which are required of them.

Truth in art is conceived as a subjective understanding of externality, or as a statement about it. Like the sense of beauty, the conception of truth is spontaneous and unrelated to the intellectual processes; it too is conditioned by the moral understanding of the percipient mind. Certain varieties of truth are especially valuable to the aesthetic experience. Among these may be listed rare truths, truths which represent difficulties overcome, characteristic truths (that is, perceptions of those ideal or characteristic forms or qualities which any object at the height of its perfection tends to assume and which it rarely in the state of actuality manages to achieve), and functional truths (perceptions that objects are fitted to their environment and that the conditions of life are adapted to organisms). In general, truth is just as necessary to the aesthetic experience as is beauty itself, for without truth even beauty loses its power of producing the aesthetic reaction on the part of the percipient.

As a mediator between truth and beauty stands imagination, an intuitive power free of both sense and intellect and yet operating through the agency of both. It is the faculty, dominated by moral understanding, which recognizes beauty in objects and produces the sense of beauty, and it is the power too by means of which truth is conceived. Its function is double; it penetrates to the characteristic and it also combines into original creations the abstracts formed by penetration. It is not to be confused with fancy, a somewhat similar faculty which is given to the light, playful, superficial; whereas imagination deals only with the grave and essential. Imagination is the power which determines the rank and effectiveness of the creative artist.

Such in the barest possible outline is John Ruskin's system of aesthetics. Upon investigation, most of these fundamental concepts may be found to have been current before his time among

the writers of the romantic era with whose works Ruskin was familiar, particularly in the works of such authors as Burke, Reynolds, Alison, Stewart, Fuseli, Barry, Browne, Sydney Smith, Wordsworth, Coleridge, DeQuincey, Hunt, Hazlitt, and Carlyle. To what extent Ruskin may have drawn from any one of these writers it is impossible to determine, for similar opinions were expressed by a number of them; and Ruskin, if he was conscious of having derived from them (a proposition which is debatable), never furnished the clues necessary for establishing the indebtedness. However, that he continued the romantic tradition in his views of art may be seen from the number of instances in which his fundamental concepts parallel those current during the romantic period. What establishes his claim to originality is his reintegration of those ideas to suit an individual approach to life and truth.

Combination of ideas is governed largely by the immediate interests of the combining mind, so that in the end what a man has to say and how he says it will be determined largely by what he sets out to do. The poet, consequently, who aims at creating the aesthetic experience and at revealing poetical truth through the medium of the written word, will be guided by his purpose to an integration which may prove entirely unsatisfactory to the philosopher—and vice versa. In either's scheme of thought, the poet's or the philosopher's, the dominating idea will be determined by the mind's fundamental interest, and the two schemes will be found to differ not so much in content as in relative degrees of emphasis and in placing of accent. It is in this respect that Ruskin differed from his immediate predecessors: the substance of their systems of thought about art differed less than their placing of accent. With the exception of Hazlitt in the romantic generation proper, and of Reynolds and Alison among the earlier writers upon aesthetics, few of the immediately preceding English writers with whom Ruskin seems to have been familiar were interested especially in art. And even though Hazlitt wrote many essays upon artistic subjects, their bulk is not so great in proportion to that of his total work as the body of what Ruskin wrote about art is in relation to *his* total output; to compare Hazlitt's dicta upon art with Ruskin's is like comparing a mountain and a molehill. Nor can Reynolds and Alison compare with Ruskin in exhaustiveness of treatment; in addition to which,

both were concerned with demonstrating theses about art antithetical in many respects to the tenor of Ruskin's ideas. Consequently, although most of Ruskin's fundamental concepts were familiar in the romantic generation, they appear in his art criticism in an entirely novel combination.

The central tenet of Ruskin's aesthetic system, the concept that morality and the aesthetic experience are intimately connected, and the definition of morality as a condition of mind growing out of intuitive understanding of the essential unity of creation under law divinely appointed for its best interests, was by no means new with Ruskin. To some extent, Hunt, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle held the same mystical views concerning existence and felt that the beginning of wisdom and right action on the part of man lies in recognizing this primary fact about the universe. And of these men, Coleridge at least recognized, as Ruskin did, that this understanding is the basis of morals, from which virtuous conduct should follow, although in actuality it very often does not. That art's function is somehow to promote virtue, was apparent even to such men as Reynolds, Sydney Smith, and Hazlitt, who did not share the mystical point of view so characteristic of Hunt, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Ruskin. All these last-mentioned men agreed in making such an understanding an essential quality of genius in the fine arts; what serves to identify the moral content of art with Ruskin is the emphasis which the idea received in his system. The idea itself was not new, but it had not previously been made the central point of a system of art criticism.

That beauty inheres in objects had been pointed out by Burke, Sydney Smith, Coleridge, and DeQuincey. Burke, Hunt, and Coleridge had declared that human response to the quality of beauty in things is intuitive and instinctive, independent of mental exertion; and according to both Hunt and Coleridge this sense of the beautiful is connected with the concept of the universe as a moral unit knit together by the laws of creative love. That one characteristic of the object in which beauty inheres is its combination of multitude into unity had also been perceived by Alison, Stewart, and Hazlitt. That another characteristic of beautiful objects is their appearance of fitness for the function which they have to perform had been pointed out by Alison, Stewart, Sydney Smith, and Hunt. Stewart, furthermore, had

anticipated Ruskin in pointing out that sublimity and picturesqueness are modes of beauty, rather than qualities separable from it, and in defining the sublime as that which gives rise to thoughts of height and ascension. When Ruskin wrote, Alison had already pointed out that the picturesque is that quality in things which sets off a train of association not necessarily connected with the object itself.

All of these ideas had never previously, of course, been gathered into the same system of thought. Familiar though the ideas may have been, Ruskin fitted them into a concept of creation as a moral whole with the result that the qualities of beauty become so many earnests of the divine plan animating creation, and with the result that recognition of beauty becomes at once the means of man's perceiving that a universal plan exists and that as a part of the plan he too is subject to its beneficent law. Man's sense of beauty springs from benevolent order and in turn results in his perception of order. Hence a new combination of familiar ideas by presenting the constituent elements in a new context has made them take on new meaning.

Something of the same sort is true of Ruskin's ideas about truth. It had been asserted by DeQuincey, Wordsworth, and Carlyle that truth is a spontaneous conception arising in the mind when it is conditioned by reverence and love for external creation viewed as the concrete manifestation of creative idea. Alison had pointed out that perception of difficulties overcome is one variety of truth especially valuable to the aesthetic experience, and that recognition of function felicitously performed is another. Reynolds and Wordsworth had declared that the characteristic truth, the perception of the essential nature of the object, of that primary quality which is chiefly responsible for making the object what it is, is another of the truths especially valuable for aesthetic purposes. Reynolds, Alison, DeQuincey, and Wordsworth had declared that these conceptions of truth must be based firmly upon observation of external nature, rather than drawn independently from the percipient mind. That this truth of conception can be expressed in art only through close imitation of the actual appearances of things had been declared by Burke, Reynolds, Sydney Smith, Stewart, Hunt, and Carlyle. Coleridge and Hazlitt in particular agreed in discussing truth and its rela-

tion to art in terms of all these principles, and to that extent were precursors of Ruskin.

But again the chemistry of genius had been at work, so that when these ideas appeared in Ruskin's work they took color from his central principle of the necessity for moral understanding. Consequently, the highest truths conceivable by the human mind were in his estimation the moral truths that benevolent law unites disparity of existence and appearance into coherence, and that a sympathetic relation to this unity under law is essential to right understanding. The pleasure in difficulty overcome and in function felicitously discharged became dependent in the new integration upon the instinctive perception that noble struggle towards perfection is one of the beneficent laws governing creation, and that healthy recognition of the individual's place in the scheme of things coupled with cheerful acceptance of that place and of the limitations it imposes, is another. Again, pleasure in perceiving the characteristic qualities in things came to be attributed to recognition that in the cosmic scheme each object has not only its appointed place but also its appointed character designed to fit it for the function it is called upon to perform. Under this view, the observation of external phenomena becomes not simply the foundation of art but also the beginning of knowledge and a religious duty; the faithful copying of objects, representing not only the Creator's handiwork but also his hieroglyphic message to the human heart, becomes an imperative duty. To attempt in any way to rearrange or to reimagine external nature demonstrates callousness, lack of understanding, and a daring impiety which does not hesitate to commit sacrilege. This concept of the relation between man and his environment, not so different from Wordsworth's, takes new significance from being expounded in connection with art and the aesthetic experience specifically, rather than in terms of human experience generally.

The same is true of Ruskin's ideas about imagination. That the imagination is the faculty whereby subject and object are fused, so that art is at once representation of external fact and expression of subjective reflection upon fact, Reynolds recognized. This fact Wordsworth and Coleridge also realized, and in addition they declared the instinctive nature of the imagination and its separation from the fancy. Dugald Stewart had

recognized the penetrative power of the imagination; and Stewart, Wordsworth, and Reynolds had pointed out that the imagination is the faculty which not only penetrates but also combines or associates principles in the composition of art. Hazlitt and Hunt made nearly all of these observations concerning the nature and function of the imagination.

When these widely recognized principles came to be incorporated into the Ruskinian system, however, they, like the ideas concerning beauty and truth, took color from the fundamental concept of the system. In the new scheme, imagination became the specially appointed faculty which enables the human organism to perform its perceptive and creative function; that is, it is the spark in the human breast which responds to manifestations of divine plan in exterior nature, the power planted in the human organism which makes it possible for it to perceive not only the plan of nature but also the essential character of each part. Moreover, as a reflection of the divine shaping power, it is the faculty whereby man may imitate from a distance the divine creative force. Fundamentally, of course, this view of imagination is not so very different from that expressed by Wordsworth and Coleridge; it differs from theirs chiefly in being more elaborately worked out and in being more exhaustively applied to discussions of art in media other than poetry. Ruskin added little to the romantic theory of imagination; he merely reoriented it.

Not only do these ideas take on new meaning from their new combination, but they have a further claim to originality in that, although most of them had been expressed before, they had not previously been expressed all together in the same body of opinion. Some of them had been combined before, of course. Coleridge and Hazlitt, for example, held views about truth in art very nearly identical with those expressed by Ruskin, but neither of them had combined his description of imagination with views of morality in art and definitions of beauty analogous to those enunciated by Ruskin. Similarly, Hazlitt and Hunt had expressed views of imagination very like those declared by Ruskin, but they too differed from Ruskin in many important ways. Consequently, viewed in relation to their immediate antecedents, the fundamental principles of Ruskin's aesthetic system

represent a broader combination of ideas about art than had been attempted before, and a reinterpretation of those ideas in relation to one another and in relation to a new central principle.

In general, Ruskin's first principles represent a continuation of the romantic tradition and a reinterpretation of romantic principles in terms of art specifically rather than in terms of life generally. Ruskin's views were transcendental; he was a concrete idealist. Like the great romantics, he loved and reverenced nature, feeling that it is packed with deep meaning for the human soul attuned to sympathetic perception. Like them, again, he felt that the senses are important as the agencies whereby the human soul becomes acquainted with those appearances in nature which, under the influence of a rightly conditioned intuitive response, based on love, reveal the ideal in the actual. He was like the romantics too in his distrust of the intellect, in his insistence that the highest conceptions of which the mind is capable are the product of spontaneous insight, stimulated by the contemplation of actuality, not produced by the conscious operation of the reasoning, analytical powers brought into play by the scientific experience. In stating that this instinctive power is allied to and a part of the imagination Ruskin again presented a romantic concept. Similarly romantic was his concept that the artist differs from the ordinary person chiefly in being a more finely organized individual, more perfect in his observation, more sensitively attuned to the infinite significances existing in nature, with the consequence that, while he cannot be said to *create* in any literal sense of the word, he may be called a creator in the sense that he discovers and synthesizes that which had not been previously observed or brought together into union. All in all, there was a close essential harmony between Ruskin's ideas and those of his great romantic predecessors. He differed from them chiefly in his interests and his aims, with the result that ideas which he shared with them were thrown into new perspectives. He held in common with such men as Wordsworth, Coleridge, DeQuincey, and Carlyle many of the same general concepts concerning things in general, but since his approach to problems was different from theirs, and since his aim and purpose in writing was different from theirs, a new emphasis came into being as the result of a new connection between these ideas and the aesthetic experience.

VITA

LESTER CHARLES DOLK was born July 20, 1906, in Michigan City, Indiana, and he attended public schools in that city until 1923, when he enrolled in DePauw University. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from DePauw in 1927. In 1929 he received his Master of Arts degree from the University of Illinois. Since that time he has been employed as an Assistant in English at the University of Illinois. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and of the Modern Language Association.